

# Gender-based Violence among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

Indian Journal of Gender Studies  
21(2) 225–246  
© 2014 CVDS  
SAGE Publications  
Los Angeles, London,  
New Delhi, Singapore,  
Washington DC  
DOI: 10.1177/0971521514525088  
<http://ijg.sagepub.com>



**Shamima Akhter**  
**Kyoko Kusakabe**

## Abstract

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority group from the northern part of Rakhine State (formerly Arakan) in Myanmar, is among the most vulnerable of the world's refugee communities. This study aims to shed light on gender-based violence among documented Rohingya refugees living in the Kutupalong camp located in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh. As refugees, they are not allowed to find employment in Bangladesh. At the same time, state support is minimal, and so they have to eke out a living from whatever work is available. The mobility of refugee men is highly restricted by violence and intimidation, which forces refugee women into the role of the family's breadwinner. Despite this, the women's status has not improved in either the family or the community. On the contrary, the women are exposed to increased violence from their families, the refugee community and outsiders. Though all refugees suffer violence, women face it both inside and outside the home. Their precarious political status as refugees and a lack of community support in the camps combine to increase their vulnerability.

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**Shamima Akhter** is a gender specialist and project coordinator of the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC), Dhaka, Bangladesh. E-mail: [shamima003@gmail.com](mailto:shamima003@gmail.com)

**Kyoko Kusakabe** is an Associate Professor at Gender and Development Studies, School of Environment, Resources and Development, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand. E-mail: [kyokok@ait.asia](mailto:kyokok@ait.asia)

**Keywords**

Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh, gender-based violence, economic empowerment, decision-making power.

The Rohingya are not recognised as citizens by the governments of either Myanmar or Bangladesh, and are discriminated against on both sides of the border. Oppressed by the government as well as the local population in Myanmar, they have been fleeing to Bangladesh since the 1960s. Some of them reside in refugee camps along the border, while most of them attempt to integrate into Bangladeshi society. This article explores the plight of Rohingya women and men who are registered as refugees and live in camps in Bangladesh.

Currently, there are about 2,00,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh. Of these, 28,000 reside in the two official refugee camps of Nayapara and Kutupalong, located in Cox's Bazar District, while the rest are scattered in several places within the country (UNHCR, 2010). In the Kutupalong camp, set up to provide shelter to refugees from Myanmar during the 1992 influx, 1,194 families (9,981 people as of October 2010) reside in a 3 km<sup>2</sup> area. It is located at a distance of 37 km from Cox's Bazar, and 10 km from the Bangladesh–Myanmar border.

In Myanmar, the Rohingya were systematically pushed out of their homes and off their lands through the continuous violation of their human rights by the government, the army and non-Rohingya local communities. The human-rights violations included bonded labour, restrictions on movement and marriage, arbitrary detention, systematic extortion, sexual violence, peremptory taxation and property confiscation. Traditionally, Rohingya women were confined to the home and were not visible in public spaces, but such practices were not sustainable in Bangladesh once they had fled Myanmar. Both women and men refugees have their movements restricted in Bangladesh, but most of the Rohingya women are unable to stay home due to economic compulsions. Building on past research that highlighted the pressures faced by women who try to support their families in refugee camps and their increased vulnerability to violence, this article argues that the power structure in the camps perpetuates women's vulnerability.

We begin with an overview of the history of the Rohingya and a review of previous research on gender-based violence among refugees.

After explaining the methodology of the study, the article describes the income-generation activities of refugee women and men and the violence they experience. Finally, the camp's social structure that enables and perpetuates women's vulnerability to violence is analysed.

## **The Rohingya**

The area of eastern Rakhine (Arakan) was home to the Rohingya for about a thousand years (Ahmed, 2010). An independent kingdom for two thousand years, Arakan became a part of Burma in 1785 after being invaded by the Rakhine (Ahmed, 2010, p. 13). The people of Arakan, mostly Hindus and Muslims, were referred to by the Rakhine as *kula* or dark-skinned people. They fled to what is today northern Arakan and came to be commonly known as the Rohingya. Thus began the story of two Arakan races. Although, the Rakhine and Rohingya lived without major conflict in pre-colonial times, ethnic hatred and suppression started during the British era. The Rohingya were politically suppressed and were not allowed to participate in independence negotiations with the British in 1948.

The Union Treaty, signed on 12 February 1947 by Aung San and leaders of other nationalities, formed the Union of Burma (Ahmed, 2010, p. 15). This treaty gave the signatory nations the option to secede from the Union after 10 years if they so wished. As the Rohingya were not invited to be signatories to this treaty they were granted no rights within the Union of Burma. Some Rohingya took to arms to establish their rights and started a movement for a separate Muslim state. In the 1950s, on receiving recognition by the then Prime Ministers U Nu and U Ba Swe, the Rohingya abandoned their weapons, but they continued to be oppressed under the military regime of General Ne Win. The Burmese army decided to drive the Rohingya out of the country, their plight becoming increasingly worse between 1962 and 1988. Dragon Operation, conducted in 1978, forced 3,00,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh, causing tremendous political and economic problems there (Ahmed, 2010). After an agreement between Burma and Bangladesh in 1979, most of the Rohingya returned to their homeland.

When the government implemented the Burma Citizenship Law in 1982, it excluded the Rohingya from the list of 135 national races. In one

stroke, all the Rohingya people were rendered stateless (Ahmed, 2010). From around 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) expropriated lands belonging to the Muslim Rohingya to set up military camps, without giving them any compensation. The stateless Muslims were now homeless as well. They were forcibly relocated in unsuitable mountainous areas. The March 2013 violence against the Rohingya was only a continuation of decades of oppression and assault.

In Bangladesh, many of the arriving Rohingya refugees live in the two official refugee camps of Kutupalong and Nayapara. Kutupalong camp has 14 mosques, one community centre, two women's centres, one men's centre, a soap-making factory, 107 tube wells and 585 latrines (as of November 2010). Nayapara camp is situated 48 km from Kutupalong camp and 5 km from the Bangladesh–Myanmar border. About 58 per cent of the present camp population was born in the camp. Most of the refugees have been in the camp for almost 20 years.

Some refugees choose to live alongside the local Bangladeshi in different parts of the country. They, therefore, have more opportunities to find work and a livelihood. However, as they are undocumented they are more vulnerable to exploitation and harassment. Furthermore, they do not have access to the meagre support offered to refugees in the camps. In this article, we have interviewed only the registered refugees living in the camps.

## **Gender-Based Violence among Refugees**

Benjamin and Fancy define gender-based violence as 'violence targeted to a person because of their gender, or that affects them because of their special roles or responsibilities in society' (Benjamin and Fancy, 1998, p. 14). Violence impacts women and men differently, even in conflict situations. Because of social constraints as well as the fear of being stigmatised women are usually reluctant to share and seek support after violent incidents (Benjamin and Fancy, 1998; El-Bushra, 2003). 'The divide between public and private renders many of these problems 'invisible'—'either literally, since it happens behind closed doors, or effectively, since legal systems and cultural norms too often treat it not as a crime, but as a family matter, or a normal part of life' (WHO, 2003, as cited in El Jack, 2003, p. 19).

Violence against women intensifies under conflict situations. As El Jack argues, violence in the private sphere

... is further complicated during armed conflict because physical and sexual violence, particularly against women, often occurs in public or in full view of family and/or community. For both women and men, however, recovery from the trauma is often hindered by an inability to discuss it because it is considered a private matter (El Jack, 2003, p. 19).

Although both women and men face violence during and after conflict, they experience violence differently. Sexual violence targets mostly women, but many boys and men are also raped during armed conflict. The irony is that women are depicted as 'victims' and men as 'perpetrators', which ignores the violence perpetrated on men (Moser and Clark, 2001, p. 3). Zarkov (2001) argues that in the former Yugoslavia, men's sexual violence was attributed to power dynamics in the nation-building process and only women were identified as victims of sexual harassment.

El-Bushra (2003) points out that during and after conflict there is a large change in the external environment and both women and men need to adjust themselves. However, adaptation capability can differ between women and men, and also women may be required to adapt more than men. According to Ondiak and Ismail (2009), the conflict in Darfur killed many men that were engaged in livestock-raising and had been community leaders and the breadwinners of their households. The loss of men led to women becoming the breadwinners, but the loss of leadership resulted in a breakdown of the community structure and community cohesion.

Other publications, such as Women's Commission (2005) and South East Migrant Health (2011), have shown that there is a direct correlation between domestic violence and changes in men's income-generating activities in refugee communities. Negative changes in men's lives, such as unemployment and alcoholism, have a much stronger negative impact on women as they increase the women's economic burden. Thus, challenging the role of men as 'providers' can have an emasculating and devastating impact on both women and men. Men may then attempt to prove their 'masculinity' through irresponsible sexual behaviour, domestic violence or other ways (South East Migrant Health, 2011; Women's Commission, 2005).

Women living in refugee camps have few opportunities for income generation. Aid agencies have introduced livelihood programmes

through training in handcrafting, basket weaving, tailoring, soap making and so on. However, the actual income generated from such training remains a matter of concern, as does the impact of such income. Azaiez (2009) cites the example of a micro-credit scheme for Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, showing how refugee women utilise their money to run their own businesses. In Ethiopia, refugee women go outside the camp to earn an income, but experience violence in the process (Women Refugee Commission, 2009, p. 4). They face violence from men outside the camp, as well as from men within their own family and community. This is because men not only seek control over the income, but also seek to reassert their status as head of the household, a status threatened by the refugee women's bold foray across cultural boundaries.

The WRC report (2009, p. 1) revealed the paradox of refugee women involved in income-generating activities, in that income-generating opportunities empowered refugee Burundi women economically and improved their decision-making power in the household as well as their conflict-resolution skills but, simultaneously, these women experienced increased violence at home because of conflict over control of the income. El-Bushra (2000) notes that married women's responsibilities increase during a conflict situation as they have to earn for the family. This increased responsibility in turn boosts their self-confidence and assertiveness. They are happy and proud to accept the increase in responsibility, and do not attempt to reassign it back to the men.

Refugee status may change the lifestyle and traditional gender roles of a husband and wife. Because it may be difficult as refugees for men to find work, women become the family's breadwinner and the men become responsible for the children and domestic chores. The reversal of traditional family roles may aggravate the sense of failure and frustration in the men, leading to tension in the family (Burnett and Michael, 2001; El-Bushra, 2003). Violence and instability during conflict situations lead to suffering and frustration for men, which is often reflected in an increase in domestic violence. The refugee status and the stress of seeking work or of unemployment in addition to factors such as poverty and low education increase the incidence of men physically abusing their partner (Taft, 2003). Women not only tolerate this violent behaviour, but also justify it by citing the violence the men have experienced and their frustrations as refugees (Burnett and Michael, 2001).

It is well known that conflict situations increase violence against women as well as men. However, the newly created income-generation opportunities for women in conflict or post-conflict situations also further violence against women. The complexity of refugee women earning their household income is the focus of this study. Through the case of Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh we will demonstrate how women have better employment opportunities than men but are a source of women's vulnerability to violence.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted at the Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazar District in Bangladesh among documented Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. Primary data were collected from the camp in two phases, the first one in November–December 2010 and the second in February 2012. Interviews were conducted in Bengali by the first author, through an Arakanese translator. In the first phase in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 households, while in the second phase 25 households inside the camp were interviewed. The respondents comprised 24 women and 19 men or eight couples, two widowers and three widows, four married men and six married women, four single women and four single men, and one separated man and three separated women. The intention was to interview both the husband and wife, but in some cases one of them was not home when the interview was conducted. Husbands and wives were interviewed separately. The households were selected through snowball sampling.

An informal group discussion was conducted within the camp for willing respondents to come and talk, and 14 people joined in to share their experiences as refugees, raising some pertinent issues. Some questions were asked to lead the discussion. Of the 14 respondents, 10 were male and four female. While the in-depth interviews included only adults, young girls and boys also participated in the informal group discussion. Key informant interviews were conducted with NGOs working with refugees as well as with the Government of Bangladesh Refugee and Relief Commissioner, the camp in-charge and the Local Chairman (a representative of the local government). The interviews included the local villagers, a tea-stall owner selling goods just outside the registered

camp, a camp volunteer and a youth group of the registered camp. To protect the identity of the respondents, only pseudonyms have been used in this paper.

The next section discusses the situation of Rohingya women and men with respect to work and income generation. Why do they need to work? What kind of work is available for women and men and what are the working conditions? What are the implications of work for refugee women and men?

### **Work and Income among Rohingya Refugees**

Registered refugees live in refugee camps and unregistered refugees live outside the camps in Bangladesh. For this study, we interviewed only those who are officially registered as living in refugee camps. Registered refugees who stay in camps are prohibited from leaving the camp without a valid permit. They are not allowed to hold jobs or integrate with Bangladeshi society. The food rations given to them by the camp authorities are too meagre for survival. The refugees also need cash to buy other necessities such as fuel, soap and clothes. Hence, they are forced to earn a cash income, either by selling a part of their meagre food rations or by seeking work.

To seek work they have to go outside the camp. Leaving the camp is fraught with danger for many reasons: (i) they are prohibited from leaving the camp and, hence have to bribe camp authorities to go out; (ii) the local police often target them as aliens, and arrest them for working; (iii) the local employers discriminate against them by paying them lower wages and (iv) at times they are beaten up by the local people who accuse the Rohingya of taking away their jobs. Despite all these problems, the Rohingya would rather live in these camps than return home to Myanmar as their lives and families are safer in Bangladesh. In Myanmar, they spent sleepless nights for fear of sudden assault or attack. In camp they do not fear physical violence, but making a living is very difficult.

Lack of money and income-generating activities is a major concern for Rohingya refugees in the camps. Their refugee status makes them vulnerable as they must work 'illegally' and they have no worker protection. Usually, men leave camp in search of a cash income, but the work available to them is often in public spaces such as construction, and so it



is risky for them to both look for and to work. Despite these problems, Rohingya men are involved in various income-generating activities as day labourers, farm workers and rickshaw pullers, and they also run small businesses.

Refugee women are mostly involved in home-based work, such as net weaving and tailoring but they also work as domestic helps, as cooks in restaurants, and in the soap-making factory (Wiggers, 2000). To increase the skills of the Rohingya, the UNHCR and the WFP provide training in tailoring (mostly for women), soap making, etc. A soap-making factory has also been developed in the camp and provides employment to a few Rohingya, the soap made here used by the refugees for daily use. The Rohingya also collect and sell firewood as well as clothes within the refugee community. Some are engaged in sex work. Most women prefer to work within their homes as their cultural practices confine them to the home.

I weave a fishing net every fortnight and my son-in-law sells it to people who want to buy. I don't need to go out to sell it (Nasima Khatun, age 37, mother of 8, net weaver, widow and main income-earner for the family).

The in-depth interviews revealed the current employment status of the respondents. Of the 19 men, 6 were farm workers, 1 was a businessman, 4 said they were daily labourers, another 4 rickshaw pullers and 4 unemployed. In contrast, three women said they were housewives, and none said she was unemployed. Other occupations listed by women were domestic worker (6), firewood seller (2), net weaver (3), sex worker (2), cleaner (2), cloth seller (2), camp volunteer (1) and hotel cook (3). It is more difficult for men to get jobs because they are more visible to the police and face higher risk of arrest. Hence, the unemployed among the respondents were only men; all the women interviewed were employed in some kind of work. Women who are not seeking jobs do not categorise themselves as unemployed. The tradition in the Rohingya community is that the men earn for the family while the women tend to the household. Even after coming to Bangladesh, some Rohingya families have retained this tradition, and their women are not looking for jobs. Moreover, as it is illegal for the refugees to work they are afraid of being caught by the police, being jailed, and of sexual or physical harassment; they would prefer to avoid such troubles. If women are to be employed it is in work

that is indoors, either in their own home or in someone else's. This reduces the risk of being arrested and conforms, to some extent, to their cultural norm of women not being visible in public spaces.

Although they are more secure in the camp than in Myanmar, where they constantly feared assault, their aspirations for a better life are being stifled. The precarious nature of their existence is very restricting and avenues for employment and development are limited. They can be arrested by the police if found working outside the camp. Caught between a rock and a hard place, their situation is exploited by local employers.

Abdul Hakim, a 50-year-old man, came to the camp 19 years ago and is a widower. He works as a daily labourer and laments the precarious nature of his employment as he is not legally allowed to work:

We are not sure we will get work in the local community. We may get today, but we are not sure about tomorrow, whether the employer will allow me to work there again. I feel uncertain every morning whether I will get any work to do today or not. I cannot even claim the same wage as local people because they [the employers] know that we are illegal, so we have to accept whatever amount they give us.

Many women are heads of households and have no men helpers. Leaving the house for work exposes such women to a different kind of vulnerability. All women respondents said they were full-time housewives in their place of origin; their mobility was restricted to the homestead. They did not leave home for forced labour or agricultural work on a farm. They worked only in the kitchen garden on homestead land. However, due to economic problems in the camp as well as the absence of men in the family, women are now going out of the home to look for employment. Roshida Begum (age 37, widow with 8 children), firewood seller, said

When my husband passed away, everything turned dark. My main concern was about my children. The limited amount of ration was not sufficient for my family's survival. I started searching for work. Being a woman in a new land and environment, it was very challenging in every aspect. I was a housewife and had no idea about the outer world. I started working as domestic helper at the nearest local home. This kind of change was painful for me. The change in status from housewife to domestic helper is very degrading. However, I do not have any option so I accept it as my fate.

## Implications of Work and Income for Refugee Women and Men

Given the limited options and risks associated with men seeking employment to earn enough for the family, women are forced to work outside the camp. This is a new experience for them. In Myanmar, the Rohingya men had been the main breadwinners and most of their cash income was through day-labourer wages. Some had their own farmland to cultivate, while others owned small businesses. The changing mobility profile and the increasing economic role of the women lead to more violence against women. Frustration over their restricted lives in Bangladesh is often cited as a reason for the increasing violence of men against women in the family.

As Table 1 shows, women's wages are lower than those of men, while refugee men earn much less than local men. Further, Bangladeshi women do not earn an income. Therefore, Rohingya women believe

**Table 1.** Wage Difference between Rohingya Refugees and the Local Bangladeshi

Occupation	Wage for Locals		Wage for Rohingya		
	Unit	Unit	Unit	Unit	
Men	Daily labourer	175–200	Taka/day	100–130	Taka/day
	Farm worker	175–200	Taka/day	100–130	Taka/day
	Rickshaw puller	175–200	Taka/day	100–130	Taka/day
	Business (tea stall)	4,200–5,000	Taka/month	2,500–3,000	Taka/month
Women	Domestic worker	Do not work		1,000–1,200	Taka/month
	Hotel cook	Do not work		1,200–1,500	Taka/month
	Camp volunteer	N/A		300	Taka/month
	Cloth seller	N/A		70–120	Taka/day
	Firewood seller	N/A		50–100	Taka/day
	Net weaver	N/A		700–1,000	Taka/month
	Cleaner	N/A		300	Taka/month
Sex worker	N/A		800–1,000	Taka/month	

**Source:** In-depth interviews, 2010.

**Note:** 1 USD = 85 taka.

that engaging in income-generation activities reduces their status and degrades them. It also sends out a message that their men are unable to support them and that they are economically worse off.

As Abdul Hakim (50-years-old) mentioned,

We cannot claim the same wage as local people but still they are not friendly with us. If they [the locals] receive 200 taka, then the employer offers us [Rohingya] only 100–130 taka. We cannot bargain with the employer because we need the money, we are refugees and this land does not belong to us. We are strangers in this land.

In rural Bangladesh the minimum daily wage is 175 taka, but the amount varies with the financial condition of the area. Kutupalong camp area is considered a financially weak area, and the average daily wage here is 175 taka. However, refugees are offered only 100–130 taka, which is about 30 per cent less than the local wage. Because of these low wages and a responsibility to support their families, some women become sex workers to survive. Rahima Sultana (woman, 31 years old) is a sex worker. She explained how her relationship with members of her family and community changed because of her work. Her experience of sexual violence in childhood and a crippling poverty forced her to take up sex work, but cultural values that degrade women sex workers led to a divorce when her husband, an old man, discovered her past.

I do not have anything to lose since I was raped in my childhood. If I can earn money for my family's well-being, there is nothing wrong with that. Otherwise who is going to feed my family? There are many girls inside and outside the camp who do not have any other option. In fact, we have to satisfy the desires of all influential people against our will, so what is wrong with earning money by selling sex?

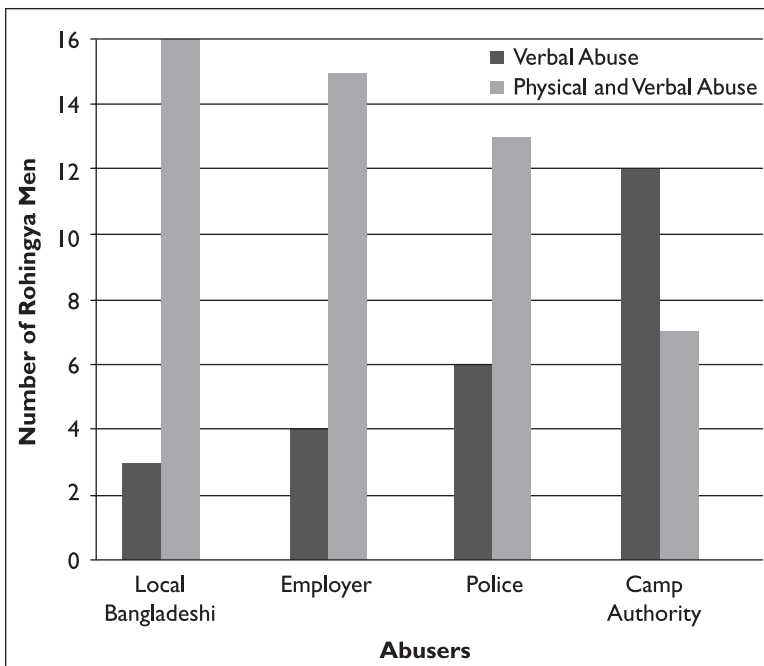
## **Rohingya Men Refugees' Experience of Violence**

The refugees had experienced intolerable violence back in Myanmar, and so fled to Bangladesh. Although their economic situation is extremely difficult, they find life more secure in camp. Economic constraints force

both women and men refugees to take up illegal and unsafe work, and they lack the legal protection that guarantees them workers' rights. In a conflict situation, violence against women and children is highlighted and violence against men becomes invisible (Moser and Clark, 2001). As seen in Figure 1, the men respondents also experienced violence. Recognition of men's experience of violence is important since it affects women's experience of violence through domestic violence, as we will see later.

Rohingya men face several types of violence from the local Bangladeshi community, their employers, the police and also the camp authorities (Figure 1). One, they are physically abused by local

**Figure 1.** Violence Faced by Rohingya Men



**Source:** Field survey, 8 November 2010 and 10 March 2012, based on 19 Rohingya men respondents.

Bangladeshi men who consider them intruders in the local job market. Two, employers exploit them with low wages and verbal abuse as well as physical abuse, mainly when asked for wages for work done. Three, they are abused by the police when caught working outside the camp. Four, they are abused by the camp authorities, mainly when they refuse to pay bribes. Sometimes, the camp authorities abuse Rohingya men as a form of intimidation and an assertion of power. Mohammad Mobin, local villager and key informant, expressed popular opinion when he said

They [the refugees] are grabbing our work and livelihood. Usually they agree to work for low wages, so employers also like to employ more refugees who offer cheap labour. This threatens our livelihood (Mohammad Mobin, 52 years old, married, retired school teacher).

### **Rohingya Women Refugees' Experience of Violence**

Most of the women reported that men's frustrations and experiences of violence directly affect women through domestic violence. Dilara's case describes how the husband's experience is brought back home and affects her. Dilara (age 26) is a domestic worker, and her husband Siraj (age 38) is unemployed. Dilara married five years ago. While describing her husband, Dilara says

My husband has a tough life; he used to regularly complain about getting abused by the local Bangladeshi community, his employer and also the local police. Once the police caught him working outside the camp and put him in jail. After his release, he stopped working. He stays home all day. He has nothing to do. He is very frustrated with life and society. Even though he was a very nice man before, society has changed him. He is not nice anymore. He passes his time by drinking. If I tell him to stop drinking, he starts to physically and verbally abuse me. I cry a lot. I know he is a very nice man, he does not want to beat me, but frustration is destroying his life.

Such men's frustration gets exacerbated because of the gendered norms that are embedded strongly in Rohingya culture—men are expected to be breadwinners and women housekeepers (Women's League, 2002).

Therefore, when women start to work outside the home, it becomes difficult for men to accept their wives' independence, and relations become strained.

An interviewed couple, rickshaw puller Mohammad Rafique (age 46) and domestic worker Tohura (age 38), described the situation this way:

My husband cannot tolerate it if household chores are not finished before he comes home. It is very difficult for me to manage all the activities. My husband sometimes cannot go outside for work, those days his temper is worse. I don't want to give him the money I earn from hard labour because I know that sometimes he uses that money to drink alcohol with a group of men from the refugee camp. I cannot stop my husband because if I try to stop him, he threatens me that he will get another woman. So, I remain silent.

Her husband complains of his frustration at not being able to sustain his traditional role as breadwinner and head of the household. His wife is the main breadwinner with a more stable income. Men feel frustrated since their mobility is restricted due to fear of police arrest outside the camp. On the other hand, women's jobs, such as domestic work, keep them indoors, so it is safer for women to work, even though they earn less than the men.

I cannot go outside for work every day. It is shameful for me as a man. I do some household work for my children when my wife is not at home. But due to work outside home, my wife also sometimes treats me wrong. She is earning, but I'm the head of the household. She should listen to me always because she is my wife. She does not want to listen to me as she did earlier, and I do not like that (Mohammad Rafique, age 48, rickshaw puller).

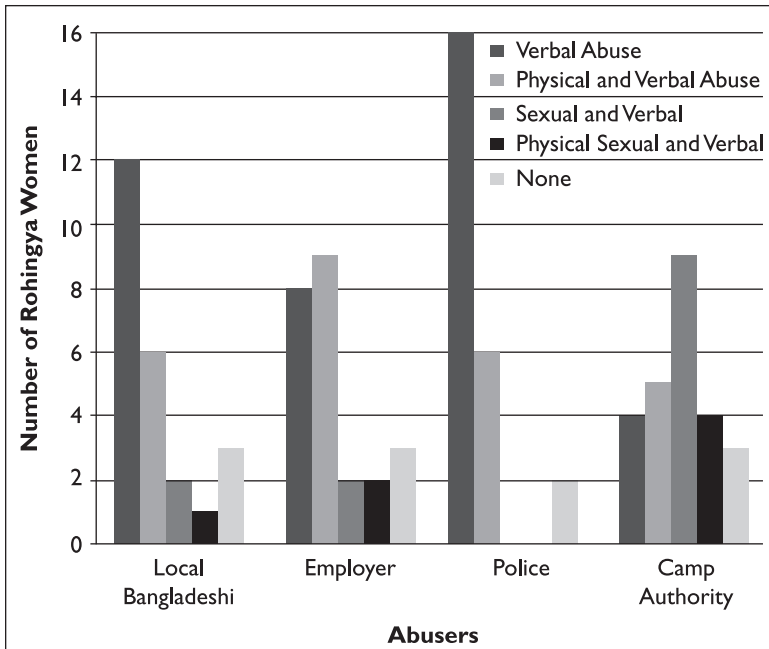
Even as women face increased tensions at home, they also experience more violence outside the home and in the workplace. The negative experiences within the home and outside show that women are unable to empower themselves despite opportunities to earn independent incomes. The WRC report (2009, p. 1) cited earlier shows that among Burundi refugees income-generating opportunities empowered women economically though domestic violence increased.

Rohingya women in Bangladeshi refugee camps are further vulnerable since they take the lowest-paid jobs in the locality. They feel their status is further degraded by the fact that the local women do not engage

in income-generating work, especially as back home in Myanmar they too were once housewives. Therefore, even though the new environment in the camp provides Rohingya women with new opportunities to earn an independent income, it does not apparently lead to any kind of empowerment. On the contrary, our respondents noted an increase in violence following women's engagement in income-generating activities.

Rohingya women face violence from the local Bangladeshi community, their employers, the police and the camp authorities. In addition to physical and verbal abuse, women also face sexual abuse (Figure 2). Rohingya women face verbal abuse from the local Bangladeshi community, who look down on the Rohingya. Employers abuse women

**Figure 2.** Violence Faced by Rohingya Women



**Source:** Field survey, 8 November 2010 and 10 March 2012, based on 24 Rohingya women respondents.



physically and verbally, as can be seen in the experiences of domestic worker Tohura Begum (age 38, married):

Once I did not go to work for a few days, without prior notice, as my daughter fell sick. But I needed money urgently for her treatment and I requested money from my employer. The family head was so angry with me that he locked me inside a room for the whole day. It was a terrible experience as a domestic worker.

At the same time, certain types of violence are confronted by only women<sup>1</sup>. Unlike El Jack's report (2003), sexual violence in public spaces was not observed in this camp. However, because women have to venture out to earn their living, they are vulnerable to violence in private spaces outside their own home. Sexual violence against Rohingya refugee women when they work outside the home is common, but it rarely gets reported because of the attached stigma. Rotna (age 38) faced sexual violence while working in a hotel as a cook. She was asked by the hotel owner to come to his house, where he assaulted her.

He asked me to bring tea to his bedroom. I felt very uncomfortable but again I had no choice. So I prepared the tea and went to the bedroom. The owner then suddenly locked the room ... and I tried to run away, but he grabbed me hard. At first I tried to shout and fight, but then I realised that I would lose my job. So I gave up the fight and reluctantly let him do what he wanted. I was not able to share this story with anyone because I would not only lose my job, but also be socially stigmatised.

Sexual harassment not only traumatises a woman's life, but may also cause her death. Nilufar (age 30) and her young sister (age 14) both worked as domestic helps away from the camp. The sister was raped by her employer, and though Nilufar helped her to escape from the employer the sister later died undergoing an illegal abortion. The double violence of rape and deprivation from social services led to her death.

## **Oppressive Refugee Community Structure**

Our findings so far on women's increasing economic role and their experience of violence is in line with what other scholars (Benjamin and

Fancy, 1998; South East Migrant Health, 2011; Women's Commission, 2005) have also reported. As El-Bushra (2003) notes, women face different challenges and adjustments in conflict situations. Women go to work outside the home like men, and experience violence like them, sometimes worse, but they respond to their negative experiences with silence and submission. Skidmore (2003) notes that being silent in the face of fear is a common strategy among the Burmese and that urban Burmese will not even talk of fear because there is no merit in it. Similarly, refugee Rohingya women feel helpless and do not talk of their grievances since the structure inside and outside the camp is stiflingly against them. We found an additional obstacle to the conversion of their independent-income generation to improved positions in the household and society—the community power structure at camp.

In the refugee camps, the Mahjee (the formal title of male Rohingya community leaders) are very influential. Nothing is done without their approval, and even the camp management is not able to access the people directly. The Mahjee support the traditional gender roles and values and, instead of assisting the impoverished women refugees, many of the Mahjee take advantage of a woman's need to be accepted by the community. Rahima (31, sex worker) said, 'They [the Mahjee] know where we [the sex workers] are going outside the camp and what we are doing, but they never disclose it to the other community members.' Refugees must get the Mahjee's permission to engage in income-generating activities, which makes the leader extremely powerful in the community. It is the norm to pay an informal fee to the Mahjee to keep him 'happy'. Some women are asked to offer sexual services to these leaders in negotiations to get permission for their businesses.

Rotna Morjina (28, sex worker) described how she is exploited not only by outsiders but also by the community leader, who is supposed to protect the refugees:

Life is very hard for me. I do not have any other means to support myself and my family. To avoid going to jail, I have to regularly please the local policemen. I have to share my meagre income and also give them sexual services. I also have to share a percentage of my income with the Mahjee to keep my registration at the camp. Sometimes he also forces me to have sex with him by threatening to cancel my registration and send me and my family back to Myanmar. So I have no choice but to do whatever he wants.

Refugee community leaders are all men but there are also some influential women leaders engaged in smuggling and sex work. Since the sexual violence that women face is not only from the Bangladeshi community, but also from refugee men, and leaders of the refugee community, women facing injustice, violence and exploitation have nowhere to turn. Their precarious legal status makes them all the more vulnerable to violence. In the particular case of the refugee Rohingya, their women's vulnerability increases due to the precarious status of the community itself. Not officially allowed to leave the camp or live independently in a normal community setting within the Bangladeshi community, the women have no choice but to endure the obscure rules laid out by individual Mahjees. This strengthens the informal power structures that make refugee women more vulnerable than Bangladeshi women.

The Mahjee's power is all-encompassing, so much so that the refugees cannot table complaints directly with the camp authorities. For example, if beaten by her husband, a wife cannot appeal directly to the camp authority; she must first approach informal leaders such as the Mahjee. In the case of rape, the male-dominated community leadership gives the responsibility of proof to the woman (Women's League, 2002). Roshida Begum described the experience of a 14-year-old girl. Her father had been deported to Myanmar and her mother was pregnant, which made the girl the household's breadwinner.

One day we all went to collect firewood. I was at a little distance from her that day when I suddenly heard her screaming and crying. The perpetrator was standing beside her and warning her not to disclose the matter. When I reached the place, he also threatened me. We all know the perpetrator. He is the son of an influential local Bangladeshi. We cannot complain directly to the camp authority. We need to first inform the Mahjee about our problem. He said he would inform the camp authority but we do not know what he did. She suffered a lot, but the boy is still moving around us proudly.

How a case is addressed or even reported to the camp authorities depends entirely on the Mahjee. Although the UNHCR has organised a centre within the camp for women and men to voice and share their difficulties and experiences, the women do not make use of it, due partly to the social stigma associated with sexual and physical violence, but mainly because they cannot directly raise such issues with outsiders.

## Conclusion

Though the Rohingya fled Myanmar because of the violence they faced, the refuge they found in the camps of Bangladesh has not freed them from violence. Both women and men refugees suffer violence from the local Bangladeshi communities, the police, their employers and the camp authorities themselves. The refugees' illegal status makes them more vulnerable and nullifies their rights when dealing with the injustices meted out to them. Simultaneously, economic hardship forces women to take up income-generating jobs outside the household. It is easier for the women to find jobs, albeit for lower wages than the men, but the women become exposed to further violence, from people both outside the household and within, as their husbands give vent to their frustrations. Sexual violence was experienced only by women respondents in our study, and it eventually destroyed their lives.

As noted by WRC (2009) and El-Bushra (2003), despite an independent income women are exposed to increased violence both outside and inside the home; thus income does not always lead to empowerment, even though the woman's responsibility to support the family has increased (Burnett and Michael, 2001). In our study, we found how difficult it can be for outside agencies to reach such women and support their empowerment through their newly earned economic positions. Access to women is tightly controlled by the powerful patriarchal structure of the refugee community, which is also hostile to women's rights. All the factors that would empower women are instead working against them—an independent income, a women's centre, a strong community structure. Despite this the women remain, unable to leave the camp as there is nowhere else for them to go.

Given the multiple factors at play here, and the many sources of violence against women, it is clear that the solution to the problem is complex as well. Only a larger change in the status of the Rohingya, including citizenship, an end to the Mahjee's power in refugee camps and an end to violence against the community, can change the women's position of acute vulnerability. Subsequently, a keen and direct interest taken by the international community and aid agency leadership could ensure that Rohingya women realise their rights. Until then, there is no way out for the Rohingya women.

### Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to those who participated in the research: Rohingya families, social workers of NGOs and local leaders. Scholarship from Government of Japan enabled data collection and write up. Veena N. is acknowledged for her support in English editing.

### Note

1. In our study, we did not encounter any male respondent who reported sexual violence. We are not clear how much sexual violence against men exists in this community, and whether it will ever be reported since the cultural stigma attached to such violence may be equal to or even harsher for men than it is for women.

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